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ABSTRACT

During the spring semester of 1987, the University of Arizona implemented an experimental information desk as a means of improving the quality of service to patrons by relieving congestion at the reference desk. Services at this desk, which was staffed by reference personnel during the first phase of the project, included serving as the initial point-of-contact for incoming patrons, providing answers to directional or quick information questions, and receiving all incoming phone calls. These functions were designed to improve the speed and quality of reference service by enabling reference staff to spend more time dealing with true reference questions, as well as to minimize waiting time for simple, quickly answered questions. The one unaccomplished objective, that of enabling the reference staff to spend more time focusing on true reference questions, was attributed to the reduction of reference desk staff members during peak service hours when the information desk was also staffed. In response to the recommendations of the reference librarians, support staff from other departments were trained to staff the information desk during the second phase of the ongoing project. (CGD)

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IMPLEMENTING AN INFORMATION DESK:

Avenues Toward Increased Quality of Reference and Loan Services.

Summary and Evaluation of the Information Desk Experiment

by

Karen Williams

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SUMMARY AND EVALUATION OF THE INFORMATION DESK EXPERIMENT
University of Arizona Library

Report submitted to the Library administration by the Central Reference Department, Spring, 1987.

Background

The idea of an information desk in the lobby of the UA Library is not new. In fact, in planning the present building during the 1970's, it was a major consideration and was included in the final recommendations of the planning committee. Then, due to financial constraints, it was not implemented when the new Main Library was finally occupied. Since that time, the subject has been discussed periodically, but it always presented too many problems (particularly with staffing) and the matter has been dropped.

Central Reference Department (CRD) personnel feel that their primary function is to provide reference service, not only to walk-in patrons but also to persons calling on the telephone. There has been increasing concern, as the volume of service has grown, that neither type of patron has received as high a quality of service as we would like to provide. Three telephone lines coming into the reference desks present the greatest problem and during peak times of the year, when CRD may help well over 600 library users each day, the ringing telephones have added a major source of stress and frustration. The addition of a variety of finding aids: GEAC, OCLC, the serials list, a second author/title card catalog, Innovacq, etc. has further complicated the reference librarian's job and made answering questions more time consuming.

To address some of these concerns, an experimental Information Desk staffed mostly by CRD members was opened the Spring semester, 1987. The desk was created to aid in the following areas:

1. Reduce the number of non-reference questions at the Reference Desk.

2. Receive all incoming phone calls.

3. Improve the speed and quality of reference service.

4. Enable reference staff to spend more time dealing with true reference questions.

5. Minimize waiting time for simple, quickly answered reference questions and directional questions.

6. Serve as the initial point-of-contact for incoming patrons.

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The Information Desk (Info Desk) is conspicuously located in the lobby entrance to CRD. It attracts patrons who previously stopped at the Security or Loan desks to ask questions. During the experimental period, the Info Desk was staffed from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. Monday through Friday. Those who took shifts at the this desk include all CRD full-time staff and four ILL staff. The following materials make up the Info Desk "ready reference" collection: a Geac terminal, a fiche reader and UA serials list, Tucson and UA phone directories, a city directory, the volume of BIP which contains publishers' addresses, Ulrich's, College Handbook, a dictionary, a list of phonefiche owned, and several guides to the library. In addition, a card file was created with answers to commonly asked questions, and a logbook allowed staff members to record questions or comments. All incoming phone calls were received at the Info Desk to be either answered or transferred to the appropriate library unit.

Statistics

A very detailed statistics form (see Appendix 1) was used at the Info Desk in order to capture as much raw data as possible. The form separated walk-in from phone questions, and further divided questions according to the source used for answering. The most significant breakdown is between those questions which were considered "answered" at the Info Desk and those which were "referred" to the CRD reference desks. A question that was transferred or referred to a library unit other than CRD was considered "answered". The following figures are based on 65 days of service from January 15 to April 15, 1987. Figures have been adjusted slightly to accommodate a few missing statistics sheets.

- 68% of total questions received at the Info Desk were answered there
- 72% of walk-in questions were answered at the Info Desk
- 61% of phone questions were answered at the Info Desk

These figures clearly show that the majority of questions received at the Info Desk are answered there. These three figures may be high because of current staffing patterns (CRD staff are able to answer more questions than non-CRD staff). However, it is estimated that even with students or volunteers staffing the Info Desk, at least half of the questions received there could be satisfied at that point.

The development and use of the referral form (see Appendix 2) helped to keep the phone lines open and assure that walk-in patrons received priority. A referral form was filled out when the Info Desk received a reference question and no one was at the reference desk to receive the transferred call. During the 65 day trial period, Info Desk staff used 147 referral forms for an

average of 2.26 written referrals per day. The time required for CRD desk staff to return a phone call ranged from one minute to several hours for an average of 56 minutes per question (based on 132 usable referral forms).

In the period from January 15 through April 15, 1986, 12,058 questions were answered at three CRD reference desks during the hours of 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. This averages to about 548.09 questions per day, 109.61 questions per hour and 36.53 questions per desk per hour.

In the period from January 15 through April 15, 1987, (the experimental time) 8304 questions were answered at two CRD reference desks. An average of 361.04 questions per day, 72.20 questions per hour and 36.10 questions per desk per hour.

During that same time period, the Information Desk answered 5650 questions (it received over 8000 questions, those not answered were referred to CRD), resulting in a total of 13,954 questions being answered by all three desks - an increase of 1869 questions over the 1986 total for the comparable time period.

Impact On Users

- Patrons received answers quickly to directional and other brief questions.
- Patrons began at the appropriate place. Loan and security desk staff are trained only to answer directional and loan related questions.
- Patrons waiting for reference assistance were reassured that they would soon receive help.
- Patrons at the CRD reference desks consistently received priority over incoming phone calls.
- The telephone message was never turned on while the Info Desk was open, so, while callers might have received a busy signal initially, they could call right back and get through.

Impact On Reference Desk

- Telephone calls were screened so that only true reference questions were received at the reference desk.
- Fewer directional and quick answer questions from walk-in patrons reached the reference desk.
- When reference desk staff were busy, a phone reference question would be written down to be answered at a slower time. This allowed reference desk staff to give first priority to walk-in patrons without feeling the pressure a ringing phone or a call on hold can give.
- In order to staff the Info Desk, the number of people at the reference desks was reduced from three to two; consequently, whatever else the Information Desk may have accomplished, it did NOT reduce the number of questions at each reference desk handled per hour. The presence of the

Information Desk did not reduce the level of patron encounters, therefore it also did not reduce the level of stress for the reference staff.

- No additional time was available to reference desk staff to devote to particularly difficult questions.

Conclusions

The Information Desk did succeed in minimizing the users'waiting time for simple, quickly answered reference and directional questions and did alleviate some of the telephone problems by receiving all incoming calls and providing an initial screening of the calls. It also reduced the number of non-reference questions at the reference desk and took the burden of being the first service point from the Security and Loan desks. The dramatic increase in the number of users served clearly indicates that users were reached who previously would not have gone into CRD for assistance. Not accomplished was the objective of enabling the reference staff to spend more time dealing with complex reference questions. This problem can be attributed largely to the reduction of reference desk coverage from three staff members to two. It is clear that the situation would have been much different had there been three reference desks staffed during the hours the Info Desk was staffed.

Because of this last major impact on the Reference Desk, CRD staff feel that the Info Desk can continue only if the reference desks are fully staffed with three people during these peak hours.

Recommendations

Because of the positive aspects of the Info Desk to both patrons and library departments, we stongly recommend that the Information Desk be continued using the same operational guidelines and hours of service developed during the experimental phase. However, continuation is contingent upon acceptance of alternative staffing. Possible alternatives include:

a. Hire additional staff expressly for the Info Desk. These positions could be filled by career staff, or Graduate Library School or other qualified students. CRD would need additional funds for this alternative.

b. Request volunteers from throughout the UA Library system. Volunteers must receive approval from their own department heads and be approved by the head of CRD.

If no alternate staffing is available, we recommend that the Info Desk be discontinued.

APPENDIX 1

IN PERSON	DIRECTIONAL	SERIALS LIST	GEAC	CARD CATALOG	CALL # LOCATION GUIDE	CAMPUS — NON-LIB.	ADDRESS — PHONE #	INCL. REF. to other depts. OTHER	REFERRAL TO CRD
10-11									
11-12									
12-1									
1-2									
2-3									

DATE _____

PHONE	DIRECTIONAL	SERIALS LIST	GEAC	CAMPUS — NON-LIB.	ADDRESS — PHONE #	OTHER	REFERRAL	LIBRARY SKILLS ANSWERED	LIBRARY SKILLS REFERRED
10-11									
11-12									
12-1									
1-2									
2-3									

APPENDIX 2

INFO DESK REFERRAL FORM

Date_____

Info Desk Staff Name_____ Time Call Taken_____

Reference Desk Staff Name_____ Time Call Answered_____

Question:_____

_____

_____

Sources consulted:_____

_____

Patron's name_____

Phone number:_____

Info Desk Staff: Please deposit this form in referral box on first reference desk. Place behind any others already there.

Reference Desk Staff: When question has been answered, place this form in top drawer of second reference desk.

APPENDIX 3

Experimental period = Jan.15 - April 15, 1987
Total days of service = 65
Statistics sheets from 3/11 and 3/20 are missing.
On 3/18 and 3/19 the Info desk was staffed for half days only.
The figures below have been averaged and adjusted for three missing days so that all stats reflect 65 days of service. This is called the adjusted total.

TOTAL QUESTIONS (Both Walk-In and Phone)

Number of questions received at Info Desk = 7905
average = 128/day adjusted total = 8288 (100%)

Number of questions answered at Info Desk = 5389
average = 87/day adjusted total = 5650 (68%)

Number of questions referred to CRD = 2516
average = 41/day adjusted total = 2638 (32%)

WALK-IN QUESTIONS

Number of in-person questions received at Info Desk = 5453
average = 88/day adjusted total = 5717 (100%)

Number of in-person questions answered at Info Desk=3922
average = 63/day adjusted total = 4112 (72%)

Number of in-person questions referred to CRD = 1531
average = 25/day adjusted total = 1605 (28%)

TELEPHONE QUESTIONS

Number of phone questions received at Info Desk = 2452
average = 40/day adjusted = 2570 (100%)

Number of phone questions answered at Info Desk = 1486
average = 24/day adjusted total = 1558 (69%)

Number of phone questions referred to CRD = 966
average = 16/day adjusted total = 1013 (31%)

BREAKDOWN BY DAY OF WEEK

Mondays - total 1820 questions for 13 days = avg. 140/day; 28/hr

Tuesdays - total 1558 questions/13 days = avg. 120/day; 24/hr

Wednesdays - total 1548 questions/11.5 days = avg 135/day; 27/hr

Thursdays - total 1535 questions/12.5 days = avg 123/day; 25/hr

Fridays - total 1453 questions/12 days = avg 121/day; 24/hr

REFERRAL FORMS

Total referral forms used = 147; average = 2.26/day

It took an average of 56 minutes per question to return a phone call (based on 132 usable forms with complete information).

TOTAL QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY CRD STAFF

Jan. 15 - April 15, 1986 total for 3 reference desks = 12,058 = 36.53 per desk per hour. (For the hours 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.)

Jan. 15 - April 15, 1987 total for 2 reference desks = 8,304 = 36.10 per desk per hour. (For the hours 10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.)